

The customer approaches the customer service counter, plops the item down and declares, "I would like to return this." The store associate politely asks, "What seems to be the trouble?" The customer responds, "I'm not satisfied with it." The associate apologizes and again asks, "What seems to be the trouble?" Again the customer declares, "I'm not satisfied. The box says that my 100% satisfaction is guaranteed and I'm not satisfied." The associate explains, "I'm sorry, but the satisfaction guarantee is backed by the manufacturer and not by our store. If you are not completely satisfied, you will need to take the matter up with the manufacturer." The customer begins to get a little irritated, "Hey, wait a second. I bought this thing here. I'm returning it here. And I want my money back!"

Let me ask you, how likely do you think it is that a manager will have to get involved in this conversation? Manufacturers may be confident in their products, stores may have return policies, but customers have a way of expressing their dissatisfaction and as you all know, the customer is always right...well, most of the time.

Today we join with thousands on a grassy hill near Bethsaida - on the shore of the northernmost tip of the Sea of Galilee. Along with them, we are miraculously fed by our Lord Jesus to our complete and miraculous satisfaction. And as we are being miraculously satisfied today, please join me in prayer...

Outside of the events of Holy Week, the miraculous Feeding - the miraculous satisfaction - of the Five Thousand is the only account of Jesus' earthly ministry found in all four gospels. Each account brings both similar and additional eye-witness details that we, who long to see Jesus face-to-face, love to hear. Almost as if we're seeing the pictures and hearing the account of some far-off destination we have longed to visit.

As a way of bringing it all together today, I share with you what is called a harmony of the 4 gospel accounts. Please understand from the start that this harmonization is not inspired and has involved certain speculation as to how each of the accounts fit together. Yet, careful attention has been given to use only the inspired text.

We begin just after the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod. Jesus is grieving and the people are questioning. His own disciples, the Apostles, have just returned from a mission trip. *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. John's disciples also came to him. When Jesus heard what had happened and because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat, crossing to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias) to a solitary place - near a town called Bethsaida.*

Bethsaida was just to the East of the place where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee. That particular location is also just outside the realm of Herod - an ideal location for the Messiah's followers to feel maybe a little safer as Jesus taught and encouraged them during such a difficult time of anger, fear, and perplexity. *But many who saw them leaving recognized them. A great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Some ran on foot from all the towns and got to the other side ahead of them. [Yet] When Jesus landed he went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. Now, the Jewish Passover Feast was near.*

That last remark may seem a bit of a pop-up statement - just the sort of pop-up message you get on your computer - and at face-value perhaps, just as useless. But, it partially explains the volume of the crowd. Since the Passover was near, many pilgrims were already making their way to Jerusalem. Those on foot would certainly have called

out to any and all who would listen that the Great Prophet - the Great Healer - was in the neighborhood. Yet for all their enthusiasm, a major point was overlooked.

When Jesus looked up and saw [the] great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"⁶ Philip was originally from the area and likely had a working knowledge of food sources available. But for such a crowd as this? I mean, what could Philip say?

What would *you* have said in such a seemingly impossible situation? What *do* you say when you're faced by a seemingly impossible situation? The frailty or finality of a job and the press of looming financial constraints leaves you straining and struggling to find some wiggle room. The demolition of a professional, romantic, or marital relationship leaves you feeling powerless to pick up your head, much less pick up the pieces of your rent relationship. A chronic condition of body, mind, or soul, leaves you with a fountain of frustration or a torrent of tears that just won't shut off. The guilt of past and present sin leaves you drowning, desperately gasping for that breath of forgiveness and freedom that could lift you from the waters. How *do* we respond to the impossible? Continued anger, continued fear, continued frustration? Such responses to the impossible seek our *own* satisfaction. But do they satisfy the *Lord*?

How about responding with understanding - understanding from the Word of the Lord that these situations are "**for the good of those who love him**"? (Romans 8:28) How about responding with repentance that recognizes our own doubts and pleads, "**Help me overcome my unbelief**"? (Mark 9:24) How about responding with even the simplest of faith that clings to the words first heard by Paul, "**My grace is sufficient for you**" (2 Cor. 12:9) and humbly accepting the faith-building divine purpose of the Lord with Mary, "**May it be to me as you have said**"? (Luke 1:38)

We may not have sat on the grassy hillside that day with Philip and the rest, but we can be confident that, like Philip, our

Lord is at work in us. For we're assured that Jesus allows such things *only to test us, for he already [has] in mind what he [is] going to do*. Philip may have incredulously answered Jesus, "**Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!**" But by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we respond with the Apostle John to the Elder in Revelation 7, "**Sir, you know.**" (Rev. 7:14)

And we wait on the Lord, relying on him to miraculously satisfy in his own time and way just as he did that day. **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin.** (Heb. 4:15) Jesus knows it all: the frustration, the pain, the struggle...and he satisfies. Just listen: **Jesus had compassion on the multitude because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he welcomed them, began teaching them many things and healed their sick.**

As evening approached, the Twelve came to Jesus and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and buy food and find lodging." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." Again, they said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up,⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many...unless we go and buy food for all this crowd."

You see, the disciples are looking to Jesus, just waiting to see what he is going to do. Clearly they had no idea for themselves. They could only point out the impossibility of the situation. But you can almost hear a rising note in their voices. Yes, half-doubt, but there is a certain expectancy of impossible possibility. 5 barley loaves - the cheapest bread available? 2 small fish, likely

the equivalent of sardines or smelt? I mean, what are these among so many?

"Bring them here to me," Jesus said. Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass - there was plenty of green grass in that place. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. He did the same with the fish. They all ate and were satisfied.

A seemingly impossible situation bends to the will of God and to the miraculous satisfaction of his people. You see, lost jobs, broken relationships, chronic pain, even suffocating guilt can all be relieved to the miraculous satisfaction of God's people. Week after week we come to sit on the grassy hillside of his house to hear his welcoming invitation, to proclaim his compassion and to be healed of sin that ails. We come to fill the very bellies of our souls with the story of his love, a story that "satisfies our longings, as nothing else can do." (CW 562:1) This is a story of light from dark, promised salvation, God made flesh, innocent life, selfless sacrifice, the lost found, souls redeemed, sin atoned, life lifted, glorious resurrection, promised presence, eternal life - all of it to the miraculous satisfaction of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, saints on earth and hosts of heaven! It is beyond comprehension...yet spiritually discerned so that by faith each of you knows the love of Christ even as we marvel at its transcendence of all understanding. What wondrous love is this?

Many a "movie-version" has been done to depict the moment of miracle. All of it is guessing, really. All we know is that Jesus gave thanks, the disciples distributed the food, and all were satisfied - more than satisfied, in fact. For we're told **When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the broken pieces of the five barley loaves and the two fish left over by those**

who had eaten. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. The details of the miracle are not given - just the miraculously satisfying results.

But isn't that really part of the miraculous satisfaction? Beyond our understanding, yet there it is. We are faced with the seemingly impossible only to be miraculously satisfied? We're not just talking about the miracle of creation, seedtime and harvest that produces food for the body. We're talking about miraculous satisfaction beyond anything that we can *ask or imagine*. (Eph. 3:20) New-found familial priorities in a lost job; greater understanding coupled with deeper love in a healed relationship; *suffering [that] produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope...hope that does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.* (Romans 5:3-4)

Oh, but don't miss the point here. Don't join with the crowd and miss the Bread of Life for the bread of barley. **After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, Jesus immediately made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.** The insatiable appetite of the sinful flesh for the body, missed the Bread of Life for the soul.

As we'll see next week in the aftermath of this miracle, Jesus makes sure that his disciples then *and now* don't make the same mistake. For in these days of unbridled joy and faith-filled wonder at his resurrection, Jesus still brings about miraculous satisfaction to hungry souls - to you and me. *We* hear this account today and are fed in spirit, knowing that for all those times we have missed the possible for the seemingly impossible, we're talking full, free, fabulous forgiveness and the promise that God can and will satisfy us, as nothing else can do. And that's satisfaction, guaranteed! Amen.

